

VOGUE

TRAVEL

Inside a Mind-Clearing Weekend at Miraval Berkshires

BY JANCEE DUNN

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Miraval cottage Photo: Courtesy Miraval Berkshires

I don't often visit wellness resorts. I'm not sure what this says about me, but I prefer to look outward rather than inward. But after two seasons on lockdown, worn by worry as people close to me have been afflicted, I've reconsidered the idea—particularly after learning that luxe but laidback wellness brand Miraval recently opened its third property, Miraval Berkshires, in Lenox, Massachusetts. What sealed the deal was the two-and-a-half-hour drive from my New York City apartment (like many Americans, I'm not feeling the urge to travel more than a few hours from home). My husband nobly volunteered to join me.

As we head into the fall, fears about the continued spread of the virus remain high. A recent CDC study found that 40% of Americans were suffering pandemic-related mental health problems. Dealing with these fears is especially tricky for wellness resorts, when so many of their anxiety-easing activities require close contact (facials, massages).

And so the adults-only, 100-room Miraval, set among 380 leafy acres in the Berkshires, has shored up its protocols with guidance from the CDC, state regulations, and experts from the Cleveland Clinic to ensure guest safety—including, but not limited to, masks required for everyone, constant-bordering-on-maniacal wiping of high-touch surfaces by staff, hand sanitizing stations, and a maximum of eight well-spaced people per class (down from 20).

“People are feeling really vulnerable now, and we want to make them feel safe,” says General Manager Vic Cappadona as we sip blackberry-infused water by the outdoor pool. “Some people have had life-changing things happen to them before coming here. We've had people cry during treatments.”

“Opening during Covid was...” He pauses delicately. “...a challenge,” he finishes with a laugh. “But there’s never been a greater time that our society has needed wellness. If you have your health, you can fix the rest. We’re deliberately at 50 percent capacity. There’s a larger demand for outdoor activities, so we’ve tripled our outside programming, and we’re seeing an increase in our private activities.”



The Miraval Berkshires pool Photo: Courtesy of Miraval Berkshires

All packages include rooms, activities and resort amenities, meals, non-alcoholic drinks, and my favorite: an unlimited smoothie, snack and coffee bar called The Roost, which I hit up multiple times daily. Nothing encapsulated Miraval's "Life In Balance" ethos better than The Roost's grab-and-go offerings. Although the usual virtuous suspects were available—green juice made with local produce, chia pudding with coconut milk and fresh berries—so too were cappuccinos and a huge selection of delectable miniature baked goods such as flaky hazelnut croissants from pastry chef Jordan Miller. And unlike at other wellness spas, alcohol is freely poured (for an additional fee). If you want to round out your grass-fed steak with a double bourbon, the staff doesn't judge.

My light-flooded room, with dramatic views of the mountains, was done in warm natural colors such as amber, navy and the blue-grey of river stones. The rooms, spa, and restaurant are connected by a vast system of temperature-controlled indoor pathways, which means you never have to step outside (or even out of your robe).



A king room at Miraval Berkshires Photo: Courtesy of Miraval Berkshires

Social distancing is easy enough in the spa, which is the largest in the brand's portfolio: A colossal 29,000 feet across 28 treatment rooms. The spa has made some adjustments to account for contagion protocols (sauna, steam rooms and the seven Jacuzzis are closed for now, and masseuses have to wear masks and gloves). Spa director Christine Mariconti told me that programs that induce calm, or sleep—such as From Stress To Rest, which uses gentle stretching, self-massage, breathwork and meditation to bring on slumber, have been especially popular during Covid. (No surprise, as sleep neurologists across the country report a spike in sleeplessness.)

Inside the spa, signs are posted by sinks asking that you repeat this lengthy mantra as you wash your hands—not once, but three times. *May I be happy. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease.* Normally, I would have rolled my eyes at this, but no longer: if repeating these phrases makes a person feel stronger in these terrifying times, I'm all in.

For the next few days, my husband and I plunged into a restorative mix of nature immersion, spa activities (Qi Gong on an outdoor platform in the fresh morning air, power flow yoga, an enveloping aloe wrap with lemon verbena from Miraval's garden) and farm-to-table food.

One night, we attended a program called Just Cook For Me Chef: four freestyle courses with wine pairings led by chef Adrian Bennett. After months of rustling up meals at home three times daily, it was heaven to have someone else do it, and entertaining to watch Bennett cook on the fly. “The fun thing is I get to do whatever I want,” Bennett announced as he finessed plates of grilled avocado with corn, cilantro and salmon. He examined a pile of greens just delivered from a local farmer. “I think I’m going to use some pea shoots on something, I don’t know,” he mused. “And does everyone like oyster mushrooms?”

My favorite excursions centered around Miraval’s farm and barn, which has a menagerie of horses (not for riding, but equine therapy such as meditating among them) chickens and an apiary. “And our donkeys just arrived half an hour ago,” announced animal specialist Jen Leahy. I loved the stillness and gentle sounds of the farm—the sleepy buzzing of bees and the soft clucking of hens.



Miraval’s barn Photo: Courtesy of Miraval Berkshires

Leahey, a state-licensed rehabilitator of injured wildlife, also runs a program called Avian Adaptations: A Lesson In Resilience, in which you can interact with an injured bird of prey who must live in captivity. I stroked the feathers of a barn owl who had been struck by a car and stepped inside an enclosure with a red-tailed hawk who was being fed; it was moving to be this close to these beautiful creatures.

Sometimes we broke free from organized activities. One day we hiked the Pleasant Valley Wildlife Sanctuary, a 1,000-acre Turner painting come to life that is owned by the Massachusetts Audubon Society. For an entire afternoon, we didn't pass a soul, and were able to take off our masks for deep breaths of the cool mountain air. I also loved the heated indoor Olympic-sized pool, which during COVID is available by reservation only (limited to three people for three lanes, but I was the only one there for three days in a row). It was bliss to do peaceful laps, utterly alone.

I couldn't leave without tackling the resort's towering aerial Challenge Course, set among the canopy of Meadowview Forest. I had just missed the Full Moon Night Climb, done monthly by the radiant light of the full moon. It's capped with an exhilarating zipline glide off of a 50-foot platform, mimicking a bird's flight through the darkness amidst the chirrups and squeaks of forest creatures.



On the challenge course Photo: Courtesy Miraval Berkshires

Instead, I attended a morning activity dubbed “Flying Squirrel,” a sort of Cirque de Soleil setup in the woods. Strapped into a climbing harness and helmet, I was raised by a jovial group of guests, tug-of-war style, until I dangled above my compatriots. When one of them pulled the “rip cord,” I felt myself plummet and then, suddenly, I was swinging through the forest. Our guide, Mike Uberti, said he could discern people’s fear levels by their body position; mine was, roughly, “clinging for dear life.” He urged me to let go of the rope, to lean back into the shoulder straps, and just float through the air. I suddenly forgot where I was, thinking only of the wind through my hair, my sense of weightlessness, the lump in my throat as the group cheered below.